

2018

A Critical Examination of the Police Use of Tasers

Nash, Jodie

Nash, J. (2018). 'A Critical Examination of the Police Use of Tasers', The Plymouth Law & Criminal Justice Review, Vol. 10, p. 105-123.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/14336>

The Plymouth Law & Criminal Justice Review
University of Plymouth

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.



A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE POLICE USE OF TASERS

Jodie Nash¹

Abstract

This study explored the police use of Tasers and how this has an impact on matters such as public confidence, governance, welfare of officers and holding the police accountable. This topic was chosen due to the lack of academic coverage that it has received and its need to be further developed for the purpose of creating more understanding around the matter. It was also chosen as a result of recent and ongoing speculation on the issue and due to its current relevance seen because of recent incidents that may either support or contradict a more elevated use of Tasers by the police. Due to the aforementioned lack of coverage on the topic, the project faced certain limitations concerning gathering information from legitimate and reliable sources. Despite this, the study is informed by academic publications, police documents, media outlets and primary research in the form of semi-structured interviews. Although the project was not completely conclusive in the findings, it was found that the public perception of the police use of Tasers does not appear to be as negative as was initially predicted. The study also found that there have been significant changes in the way in which the topic is viewed by multiple societal groups, suggesting that further change may be imminent. From this project, it has been concluded that the nature of the topic inhabits a number of ongoing developments, so it would not have been feasible to produce one irrefutable result.

Keywords: Tasers, personal protective equipment, police accountability, governance and public perceptions.

Introduction

The term 'Personal Protective Equipment' (PPE) could be seen to be a simple term when relating to the general population but concerning the police, the use of PPE could be considered to be one of the most crucial parts of how personnel conduct their work and manage their image. Although within the term there is emphasis on the 'personal' aspect, for the police PPE could be said to mean a lot more than just the protection of oneself. There are many platforms to the use of PPE such as public protection and suspect detention, making it a very relevant aspect of policing. Not only is PPE used for physical actions, but it

¹ Jodie graduated with a first class BSc (Hons) Public Services (Policing) degree.

could also be said to be used for police accountability and authority. Despite the fact that all of the stated reasons for the use of PPE may be justified and necessary, it could be argued that not everyone is able to comprehend the supposed good nature of such equipment. In simple terms, the public may feel more threatened than protected by the equipment carried by the police. There could be said to be a slight irony in this concept as one of the main purposes of the equipment carried by the police is to protect the public, yet it seems to be one of the most prominent factors that incites public fear of law enforcement. One piece of Personal Protective Equipment that has received a significant amount of controversy is the Taser. The introduction of Tasers was initiated in 2003 with a 12-month trial period which led to the full implementation of the stun guns in 2004 by Home Office (IPCC, 2014). The most common type of Taser used by British police is the X26 which projects a pair of barbs which are attached to insulated wires for the purpose of incapacitating a suspect. With a range of 21 feet, the Taser can be used in situations where there is the possibility of conflict arising (College of Policing, 2013).

The key aims for this dissertation were to assess the primary uses of the Taser and in what context it is used. Within this study, the researcher aimed to identify the underlining issues that have contributed to the animosity surrounding the police use of Tasers, as well as force in general. The study also intended to establish whether, despite other conceptual issues, the Taser is the safest piece of equipment for both the public and the police. This was explored in a physical context as well as within the context of accountability. The methodology for this project consisted of a combination of empirical and desk-based research in order to form the most appropriate framework for achieving reliable and concise findings. The empirical research was composed through the use of semi-structured interviews with serving and ex-police officers, which lead the primary research to produce findings concerned with perception and perspective. Although the researcher aimed to make the secondary research inclusive of all elements of the project, it was seen that it was more representative of public opinions so the use of semi-structured interviews with police officers enabled the researcher to receive a more diverse view on the topic. To balance the focus of the material and move away from personal opinions, the secondary research mostly explored the more factual aspects of Taser use such as health implications and the science behind the deployment of such a device.

1 Literature Review

An increased reliance on technology has meant that every element of society has been subjected to constant change and development, resulting in an innate need to keep up with the newest and the most innovative resources available. The police, as an organisation, is

no exception to this concept as it has displayed its attempts, despite monetary restrictions, to keep up with the times and move from the old to the new. Although personal protective equipment has made slow and steady progression towards more effective and modern ideas, the introduction of the Taser is arguably the biggest change in the equipment carried by the police in the UK. The Taser has been said to bridge the gap between more mundane resources such as incapacitant spray and more excessive equipment such as firearms.

Public Confidence

Fear of weaponry² could be said to be a very significant contributing factor to the lack of public confidence in the police. This fear could be argued to have originated from many different causes, but it could be suggested that the main reason for this aversion to weaponry comes from a lack of knowledge on the topic at hand. In 1978, Wright wrote that 'developments in military hardware receive critical attention' but suggested that the same attention was not paid to that of police weaponry and technology (Wright, 1978, p.305). A more recent publication that shows its concerns for the perception of the police to the public is a survey that was conducted by the Police Federation of England and Wales (PFEW) in conjunction with the University of Nottingham (Polfed.org, 2016). The purpose of the survey appeared to be to gather information about police personnel's preference for and accessibility to protective equipment but when the results were evaluated, the focus seemed to be put upon how such equipment would affect the public. It could be argued that, despite holding a front that appears to support the opinions of police personnel, civilian organisations present the importance of ideology and imagery over the care of those who serve to protect. The finite accessibility primarily comes from the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) through their suggestion that the current 'risk picture' in the UK does not justify a nationwide rollout of Tasers (Polfed.org, 2016). Not only do they suggest that there is not enough necessity for this particular piece of protective equipment, but they also claim that a lower amount of Tasers available to officers will help to uphold 'public confidence'³ in the effectiveness and impartiality of the police. The PFEW conducted a further survey following the results of the previous one but this particular survey focused on the opinions of the public instead of the officers (Polfed.org, 2016). From the results of this survey it can be seen that 71 per cent of the respondents considered it acceptable for officers to carry a Taser and four out of five participants claimed that they would be more likely to approach an officer for help if they were in possession of a Taser. These results could be said to contradict the presumptions of the NPCC on how the public perceive the police use of Tasers. PFEW

² The researcher acknowledges that 'weaponry' is a fluid term and can be interpreted in different ways.

³ Public confidence has been used as a monolithic and undefined term as it has been determined by the researcher as a subjective concept that is interpreted differently depending on the perspective.

chairman Steve White claims that 'Attitudes are changing, and people recognise the benefits Taser can offer' (Polfed.org, 2016). The contradicting views of the NPCC and the PFEW raises the argument of whether police should be holding a heavier focus on the imagery of the organisation or the actual effectiveness of the service. Work by Robert Reiner implies that the police are now more about 'symbolism than substance' (Reiner, 2003 cited Lee and McGovern, 2013), which may be seen to suggest the police are more concerned about how they are seen by the public rather than the effectiveness of the service that they provide.

Police Protection

Whilst it could still be said that the NPCC is more interested in the way in which the police, as an organisation, is viewed, the PFEW seem to have more of a concern for the welfare of police personnel. As a part of the survey conducted by the PFEW, officers were asked whether they experienced use of deadly weapons against them at least once a month; 6 per cent claimed that they had. Although this statistic may seem low, it clearly contradicts the NPCC's suggestion that the current 'risk picture' does not necessitate the use of Tasers. Not only could it be said that officers do not have access to the equipment they may need to protect themselves, it could also be said that the equipment that police officers do have access to pose more of a threat to them whilst deploying than if they were to have access to Tasers. Although there is constant uncertainty over what method of force is the most lethal to recipients, it is not often considered what may cause the most damage to those who are deploying such weapons. Research conducted to explore the effects of use-of-force and less-lethal weapons on both suspects and officers in the US found that 'officers were unaffected by the use of CEDs [Tasers], whereas the odds of officer injury increased slightly when OC spray was used' (MacDonald et al. 2009). Although the effects of the incapacitant spray may not be life threatening, officers have a right to feel safe and have confidence in the equipment that they are provided with. Not only has it been suggested that other police weapons may pose more of a threat to officers than the Taser, but also other physical tactics have been said to be more dangerous. In a publication by the US Police Quarterly, it was suggested that 'officers can use them [Tasers] at greater distances than hands-on tactic' (Paoline et al. 2012). Despite the dismissal that has been seen from the NPCC on the importance of officer safety, 1997 saw the inclusion of police personnel in health and safety at work legislation, suggesting that if the police, as an organisation wishes to maintain its legitimacy, it must conform to the requirements of the legislation (Newburn, 2008).

Organisational Accountability

Again, it could be said that organisations are more interested in putting the image of the service above everything else. Although it could be argued that this is done with the intention of ensuring the best interest of the public is catered for, it could also be suggested that this attitude is held merely for the purpose of ensuring that the organisation does not have to be held accountable for more than is necessary. Though Taser's are talked about in a positive way by some; mostly those who see the biggest benefits of them first hand such as officers who have had to deploy them, not everyone holds the same positive perception of them. One major antagonist to the idea of Tasers is Amnesty International which is a 'global movement of people fighting injustice and promoting human rights' (amnestyusa.org, 2012). In an article about police use of Tasers, the group claims to believe that 'the weapons should only be used as an alternative in situations where police would otherwise consider using firearms', suggesting that they are against the use of Tasers by operational officers in cases that would not necessitate the use of lethal weapons. Linking to this is the IPCC's insistence that the police must avoid 'mission-creep' which means they must 'robustly justify' each use of Taser to ensure that the weapon was used because it was a necessity, not just because it was readily available (thejusticegap.com, 2013). With the development of human rights legislation, the police have had to significantly reform how they act upon every situation but especially relevant to the use of Tasers is how the police have had to rethink their use of force (Neyroud and Beckley, 2001). Not long before the Human Rights Act was implemented in 1998, it was suggested that the police were beginning to move away from the old fashioned 'street fighter' tactics when dealing with crime (Waddington, 1991). Even with this blatant public knowledge of misconduct involved in police use of force, it could be debated that change did not come around until after actual legislation was put in place, potentially implying that the change that has been seen has predominantly come from fear of legal repercussions rather than as a result of improved discretion. With this in mind, it could be suggested that police personnel are more concerned about the accountability of their actions rather than the treatment of the public. Although organisations such as Amnesty International are against the police use of Tasers, it could be said that Tasers are the weapons that bridge the gap between firearms and less-lethal weapons, providing the police with a potentially safer option to avoid having to use unnecessary force that could endanger the public more.

An inquest conducted by IPCC found 'there was some concern about the police using physical strikes, which could be seen as 'fighting' which could suggest that Tasers may be seen to be less aggressive as they do not actually need to be used in a way that may seem like officer have a lack of control (IPCC, 2016). Such findings could suggest that the police

have in fact taken into consideration how physical use of force may be perceived by the public and have made what they deem to be appropriate changes to ease the fear that may come with traditional methods of suspect detention. It could be suggested that within recent years, the public have begun to fear police brutality less as their attention has been drawn more to the new methods that British police use to detain suspects. Because of this factor, the government and police forces have had to ensure that every situation that occurs in which a Taser is used is thoroughly justified and accurately recorded.

Officer Accountability

In the research conducted by the American Journal of Public Health (MacDonald et al. 2009), the results suggest that any injuries sustained during or after being exposed to the deployment of a Taser did not come from the weapon itself; other factors had the potential to affect the condition of the suspect. Although this could be said to heighten the amount of faith in the police use of Tasers, other contributing factors would have to be considered when establishing why there are the amount of injuries and even deaths there are as a result of Taser deployment. One recent incident that has caused uproar about the police use of Tasers is a case in Plymouth in which a petrol-soaked man was ignited whilst being Tasered by an officer who had been called to the scene (BBC, 2015). Due to the primordial nature of the case and that fact that an inquiry was still underway, it was unclear whether it was the Taser that ignited the fire as the man was also holding a match at the time and threatening to set himself on fire. Despite the fact that the cause was still unclear at the forefront of the inquiry, the media immediately framed the case to negatively implicate the police and place blame on tactics used to control the suspect. From the perspective of the police, it could be argued that whatever method of prevention they attempted to use, there was very little they could do in order to resolve the situation. By using the Taser, however potentially dangerous it would have been in the situation, the police displayed pro-active attempts to disable the suspect from doing serious harm to himself without leaving room for critics to claim that they had not acted at all. At the closure of the case, it was determined that, despite the fact that it was suggested by the forensic scientist that it was most likely that the Taser that had caused the fire, the constable was not at fault as he had followed national guidelines on the police use of Tasers. Although the constable was cleared of gross misconduct, it was brought to light that within police Taser training, officers are warned of the risk of using the weapon around flammable liquids. Regardless of the obligation to take action, the officer potentially put the suspect in more danger by deploying the weapon.

An article published by the Science and Justice Journal explored the ignitability of petrol vapours by use of Tasers by law enforcement (Clarke and Andrews, 2014). The article

concluded, through conducting experiments, that it is possible for Tasers to cause ignition of petrol vapours when deployed in the same vicinity, raising the argument of why police personnel are not prohibited from using the weapons under these circumstances. It could be said that such an oversight falls at the feet of the policy implementers, who happen to be the ones who are not held accountable for any fallacious conduct seen as a result of misguidance. From this, it can be seen that blame for such incidents could potentially fall on the street-level policing enforcers, therefore effecting the organisation as a whole, leaving them completely accountable. This could be another reason why there are so many internal forces against more officers having access to Tasers. It could be argued that as the police has progressed from a force to a service, along with the increased public involvement, the organisation has attempted to eradicate any opportunity for the public to criticize, rather than reforming to cater to what the public actually needs. This change has arguably taken away from police authority and has transformed the organisation into a service that aims purely to please rather than protect.

Governance

Less-lethal weapons are now arguably on the rise as firearms are increasingly frowned upon within society, but whether this supposed decrease will actually help towards improving public confidence is unclear. Statistics on the amount of firearms officers show that the numbers have been cut by 15 per cent between 2008/09 and 2013/14 (Gov.uk, 2014) but it could be suggested that this may have eased the fear of firearms only to move the focus to other weapons. It was suggested that this cut was made in conjunction with the fall in need for firearms operations (Nottingham Post, 2009) but the government has also previously suggested that it is committed to listening to the demands of the public by increasing the amount of readily available firearms officers which would suggest that they still believe there to be a need for them. An incident that contradicts the government's claim that there has been a fall in the demand for firearms officers is the recent attack on Westminster that saw the death of five people, including one unarmed police officer. An article in The Independent examines claims that have been made to suggest that the fatalities came as a result of a lack of firearms officers guarding the gates (Watts, 2017). The attacker was killed on scene by the bodyguard of Michael Fallon, who was there out of coincidence. It could be argued that by putting restrictions on the availability of firearms officers, not only did this incident make the police look incapable, but it could also be inferred that the public must fend for themselves in times of emergency, like the civilian body guard had to do on that day. Despite the government releasing the previous figures to the public with the possible intention of attempting to ease the public fear of firearms, they have seemingly contradicted themselves and left it unclear as to whether they believe the public want more or less firearms officers

available. This 'smoke and mirrors' (Polfed.org, 2016) technique seems to have only created confusion on what is actually being implemented and whether governance actually has any knowledge of the needs of the public.

When linking this to one of the first points made in this review about lack of public knowledge in policing practice, it could be said that it would not be unjustified to suggest that this is a large contributor to the absence of public confidence in the police. Such seemingly manipulative techniques raise the question of whether the police really do provide a service to the public as they claim to do. Wright suggests that 'new police technologies facilitate the creation and maintenance of totalitarian societies' which could imply that he believes that not only is there not enough information available to the public about the technologies used by the police but that the police are also using said technology to manipulate and control them (Wright, 1978, p.305). Although this could be related more to technology such as surveillance, it is also applicable to police weapons on the grounds of intimidation and use of force. Despite the fact that this reflects on a time that the development of technology was still at a very tender stage, it can still be inferred that the public are relatively in the dark about police development, whether it is accessible to them or not. In an exploration of 'new policing' by Reiner (Reiner 2010), he explores the way in which policing tactics have progressed to cater more to public perception. He uses the words of Sir Robert Mark, who was the chief Constable of Leicester City Police in the 70's, who suggested that 'their secret weapon was not water cannon, tear gas or rubber bullets, but public sympathy'. Such a statement implies that the police are at liberty to take advantage of any empathetic dispositions that the public may have towards them rather than using traditional and transparent tactics. It also suggests a lack of willingness to address the issues that could create a need to use such weapons, inferring that the police only wish to find short term solutions that seemingly adhere to the aims set out by their governance rather than seeking long term methods. Contradicting both Wright's implication that the police and governance attempt to construct a totalitarian society and Mark's approval of public manipulation is the work of Rogers who claims that in order to 'answer the increasing demands for better policing of firearms situations, the government and police forces of the UK have committed to the research of less-lethal weapons' (Rogers, 2003). With this statement, it is clear that the article means to suggest that the opinions and concerns of the public are taken into account in regard to matters such as police weaponry. Although this reflects the responsibilities the government has to adhere to the needs and desires of the public, it also shows that in order for the public to feel at ease with police conduct, the police as an organisation has a responsibility to cater to both the demands of the public and its governance (Gilling, 2014).

2 Findings and Discussion

This section of the project discusses the findings procured from both the secondary desk based research and the semi-structured interviews conducted.

Police Welfare

The first question posed to the respondents in the semi-structured interview was:

'In your opinion, what is the main purpose of personal protective equipment carried by the police?'

Each respondent gave a relatively similar answer. It was clear from the results that as officers, the respondent's view PPE, first and foremost, as a way of protecting themselves. One respondent followed this view with a statement that it is also *'to deal with incidents without causing stress to other people'*. This could be seen to suggest that PPE is also provided to officers to protect the public, as was implied in the Literature Review. Despite the fact that the responders acknowledged the fact that PPE is provided to officers for their own safety, the researcher found that it was felt by some that the welfare of police personnel is overlooked to some extent. When asked whether they believed this to be the case, one respondent, who is a custody sergeant in the police, made it abundantly clear that they were in agreement that the welfare of officers is not a main priority for many. They went on to claim in a further question that *'in Custody [Tasers] have been outlawed'* leaving them feeling as if they did not have the sufficient equipment to effectively do their job and keep themselves and their team protected. When asked whether they would carry a Taser if they had the opportunity, the response was varied; one said that they would as they felt it would increase confidence and ability to work effectively. The same respondent claimed that their female partner, who is 5ft5", had found their PPE very ineffective before they were given a Taser due to their inability to use enough force to have an impact with equipment such as a baton. It could be suggested that because of moves towards a more diverse and equal service, certain issues have been overlooked and there are circumstances that should be reviewed depending on defining factors such as strength and ability.

Top-down Policy Implementers

It was found that the opinions of the NPCC have been very influential in the suggestion that there is a significant difference in the opinions of those from different ranking positions. It could be inferred that higher-level policy implementers cannot fully comprehend the needs of the street-level bureaucrats, therefore, there is a lack of understanding between the two levels and policy implementation, as a result, does not cater for certain risks faced by officers. As was suggested in the Literature review, it appears that high level implementers

are more concerned about accountability and public confidence than the safety of the officers below them. This is supported by the respondent's answers which imply that policy is implemented more on the presumption of what is best, rather than what works. One respondent implied that if they had a Taser they could '*Taser [detainees] through the hatch*' of the cell which would mean there would be minimum impact on their staff, themselves and the detainee. Another respondent, who is a senior officer, claimed that they would not carry a Taser because the '*risk is too great for the lack of support you get*'. They went on to suggest that the policy implementers are enthusiastic when it comes to giving out such equipment but are not willing to take any responsibility for what may happen with said equipment once it is in the hands of the police. Supporting this perspective is the Home Secretary's proposal for the introduction of more powerful Tasers to the police (Kentish, 2017). It has been seen from the secondary research that there are many antagonists to the roll out of the Tasers that are currently used so for another governmental figure to propose such a drastic action, it raises the question as to whether high level policy implementers are concerned about what will be the result of what they put in place or whether they are more concerned about being seen to be pro-active in the eyes of the public. A recent incident that could be seen to further support this concept is the aforementioned attack on Westminster which could be argued to have had a big impact on how the government promote the police. Prior to the police response to the event, the government could be suggested to have been very critical of the police, along with the public and the media. Since the attack took place and police have been seen to have responded well to the incident, the government have actively shown their unyielding support for the organisation. It could be argued that this change in allegiance is a front put up in order to please the public. A distinct difference between governance and the police is the time in which they have to maintain an effective service. Most governmental bodies in power only have to maintain a good image for the 4 years that they are in the public eye whereas the police, both as an organisation and as individuals, have to forever fight for public support. Due to this, it could be argued that the government are more concerned about seeking a fast fix for situations, such as having to chop and change who they support.

When asked about the motives of top-down policy makers, one respondent stated that

'They have one eye on the electorate' as well as stating:

'they will jump on some kind of situation that's occurred to use to their own ends. But I think more important, they've got to reflect the will of the public'.

Such a statement could be seen to support the suggestion that top-down policy implementers are willing to manipulate certain situations in order to promote their cause,

much like what has been displayed with the recent terror attack on parliament. One respondent claimed the government *'ostracise certain aspects of the public by championing others to suit the need of the capitalist venture'* which shows strong implication that they believe that the government have the dexterity to manipulate the public services to best cater for their needs. An example of this previously discussed in the literature review is the claims that were made by the government about the reductions of firearms officers due to the fall in demand of firearms operations as well as them being committed to listening to the demands of the public. It could be suggested that this particular sector of the police suffered cuts to their service in order for the government to attempt to appease the public. Despite the fact that this may have eased public fear of firearms, it could be argued that the government potentially increased the danger to the public by refining resources merely to ease the threat of losing public favour. Something such as the Westminster attack could be used as evidence that a lack of firearms officers is putting the public more at risk. A statement made by one of the respondent's suggested that they believed that, because of the recent attack, the police will have to seriously consider introducing more fire arms officers.

It appears that those of higher power have made decisions on police conduct based on what they presume the public wants, rather than what they actually want. This can be seen from the NPCC's claim that Tasers lower public confidence, yet when PFEW conducted a survey asking the public, the response was relatively positive. One respondent, when asked what they thought of the current public attitude towards PPE, claimed that they think *'the general public are aware that there are a lot of nasty people out in society who will try and use an awful lot of force in order to get away with things'*. One question that was asked in the semi-structured interviews was:

'Do you believe that top-down policy makers, such as politicians, are less concerned about things such as 'care in the community and more about how their policy implementation is perceived?'

The feedback from one of the respondents clearly implied that they believe that:

'people aren't being looked after the way they ought to be which increases the demand and danger of things so now instead of things becoming a long running matter to be dealt with, they're now a matter of urgency so therefore they have to have police intervention'.

Such a claim could be seen to imply that because of changes in policy initiated by the government, the care of the public has deteriorated and the elevated stress on demand for police intervention has come as collateral damage. This perspective suggests that, through trying to please the public, the government has inadvertently neglected both the public and

the public services. All of these arguments raise the question of whether the police can truly be considered apolitical. The police are supposed to be subservient to the public and the government, yet they are not allowed to be seen to support any particular party despite the fact that the party in power has a large say in the way in which the police conduct their work.

Symbolism vs. Substance

A further question in the semi-structured interviews was:

‘Academic writer Robert Reiner has claimed that policing in our current society is more about ‘symbolism than substance’ in regards to the way in which law and order maintenance is enforced. What are your opinions on such a claim?’

Respondents mostly agreed with the statement with differing justifications for their responses. One respondent claimed that *‘symbolism is strong because we are in a media environment’*. They went on to suggest that because of the way in which society acquires its information, it is important for the police to maintain a positive symbolic status. They implied that the rotten apple theory is inherently applicable in the current social environment, saying that *‘If you get a bad video of a cop doing a bad job that will go viral very quickly and that will undermine the job that other officers are doing’*. It has been found that the media is a significant adversary to the police and it is clear that in a generation that is so reliant on technology and medial influence, the media has a lot of power over public perception. It could be inferred that in order for the police to achieve a sufficient level of public confidence, they have to manage how their image is transferred through the media, however unreliable they believe it to be. The same respondent claimed, in response to another question, that the public are more intelligent than they were a few years ago and have the capability to make up their own minds about what is the truth and what is mere speculation. From this, it could be suggested that the police trust the public to come to their own conclusions. Another respondent, who was also in agreement with Reiner’s statement, placed more of the blame for such a perspective on the way in which the government wish the police to be seen by the public, yet again implying that the government has more control over how the police are viewed in the public eye. The respondent claimed:

‘the conservative type government don’t like police in white shirts and see police as manual workers, so they would rather have us in black like some sort of quasi paramilitary type thing which would lower our standing in society’.

This response seems to suggest that the government looks to undermine the power and authority that the police have, potentially to assert its own power over the organisation and to put it in its place. This concept could arguably suggest that this respondent believes the

police to be more politicised, meaning that it is not in control of its own image, but is seen to be in the shadow of its governance. It could be suggested that there is an obvious disparity between the government and the police, as discussed in the literature review. This contradicts the response from the previously mentioned respondee who seemed to place the responsibility for symbolism of the police on the organisation itself.

Old vs. New

A matter that was uncovered within the interviews was the difference in opinions over which piece of equipment is the most effective, putting aside any other issues such as accountability and public confidence. The respondents were asked whether they had used: Batons, Incapacitant spray, Tasers and combative force. All respondents had deployed their baton and had used combative force, all but one had used incapacitant spray and none of the respondent had used a Taser. Despite the variation of uses, each respondent had quite strong opinions on each of the different pieces of equipment. The most criticised piece of protective equipment was the incapacitant spray due to the effects it has on the officer deploying it as well as surrounding people in the vicinity of the spray. Two of the respondents said that they had been affected by the irritant, whether they were deploying it or not and both claimed to have a very low tolerance for it, meaning that their capability after being affected by it was very significantly diminished. This leaves room to question whether this is an effective tool if it incapacitates the officer as much as the suspect. When comparing the use of Tasers and incapacitant spray, it was discovered from research conducted into the matter in the literature review that the Taser was not found to cause long-lasting injury, but the spray did display dangers to both the users and the recipients. When asked about opinions on the Taser, two out of three respondents had very positive perspectives on the piece of equipment. One respondee claimed that *'because the way the Taser works is that it is not dependent on hitting sensory functions such as the cs spray or the baton'* implying that the Taser may be able to effectively incapacitate the suspect with ease that cannot be had from other devices. The other respondent who was supportive of the police use of Tasers claimed that:

'It's a very useful tool and I think 80% of the time, its deployed and pointed at the person but never used. The little red dot comes up on the chest is enough normally for the person carrying the knife or the chair leg to look down and think "maybe not"'.

It was implied that the Taser seems to be more effective when used as a threat than actually deploying it due to the fact that it shows that the police have the power to incapacitate if people are not compliant, but also have the ability to apply discretion and offer an alternative way out of a situation that could have potentially escalated to use of force. The respondee

who was not so supportive of the Taser projected a distinct preference for the baton. They suggested that if they used the baton, it would be a lot more injurious than if they were to use the Taser. Another respondent suggested that, much like with the Taser, the mere threat of the use of the baton is usually enough to make the suspect compliant. Despite this, the respondent preferred the use of the Taser as they believe it resulted in less long-lasting effects. Their justification for such a preference was that if they were to use the baton to achieve an arrest, they would have the ability to cause harm to the extent of breaking bones but with the Taser, the suspect would only be in discomfort for around fifteen seconds. The same respondent made it clear that they were concerned about the welfare of the suspects after they had been exposed to the incapacitant spray by saying *'With CS spray, people can go through the whole night in the cells still with irritant on their face and it can be uncomfortable for them'*. This difference in priorities brings to light issues such as human rights. Since human rights legislation was brought in after World War II, policing has had to reform the way in which it uses force. Policing by consent is now a fundamental concept within the current social environment which means that the police have to ensure that everything they do is proportionate, legal, accountable and necessary. Because of this as well as a police officer's duty of care, use of force must be utilised only to incapacitate, not to harm.

One respondent, when asked whether the use of Tasers or Combative force was seemingly more aggressive, claimed that *'[you have] got to edge on the line of doing your role within the law and then you step over to use it as a torture technique'*. This statement suggests that there is now a fine line between using reasonable and unreasonable force, which is arguably a very subjective concept so could be seen to be difficult to define. In a voyeuristic society, a vast majority of incidents are captured on camera phones, shared through social media and observed by the rest of the world so it has become exorbitantly crucial for the police to act within the law in regard to use of force. One matter that was mentioned by a respondent in the interview was the use of body-worn cameras. This respondent held the opinion that not only should the police be held accountable for their actions, but they should also have the opportunity to accurately display the legitimacy of their actions. They claimed that *"Now it's much fairer and it's much easier for the police to stay within that framework or for someone to say, is that within the framework?"* addressing the benefits to both the justice system as well as to the individuals and the organisation. They went on to say:

'And where they have used body-worn cameras recently, I think it was 98% reduction in complaints against the police when body-worn cameras were worn. Having that body-worn video would compensate for the fear the public have when carrying a Taser'.

From this, it can be seen that the respondee believes that the use of body-worn cameras in conjunction with the police being equipped with Tasers may ease the public fear of Tasers as they are able to see for themselves the way in which the equipment is used. It also means that the public are able to directly hold the police accountable for their actions, potentially making them feel more in control of the way they are policed, supporting the 'policing by consent' concept.

The findings discussed correlate with one another and provide a further insight into matters such as welfare of officers, political influence, imagery and perception, and effectiveness of equipment. It can be seen that there is a wide variation of opinion on each matter and, although much of what was found was not completely conclusive, there is a definitive move towards the preference and potential acceptance of the use of Tasers. It was found that, from the semi-structured interviews and publications, that the welfare and safety of police officers is overlooked as a result of constant attempt to win the favour of the public. This could be said to be a futile concept as officers cannot protect the public and, therefore, please them if they are not safe and protected in what they do. Despite this, it was found that governance has disregarded this factor in what appears to be the false pretence that the public are far too ignorant and naïve to realise. It has been seen that the public are increasingly more comfortable with holding higher powers accountable for their actions, so it could be argued that the government will be next in line to face the full brunt of the harsh judgement of the public, if they are not already.

Conclusion

To conclude, the police use of Tasers has many facets that are required to be explored in order to fully understand both the necessities and the limitations. On the surface, the concept may appear to be black and white but like with any use of force, there are many considerations that must be taken. The physical considerations that have been made in this project include the functionality of the Taser, the health implications it may have and the practicality of using one. More conceptual considerations that were made consist of public confidence, accountability, political input and fear of force.

The researcher found that there are many alternative views on the Taser depending on things such as lifestyle, background, career and political sway. From the desk based research and semi-structured interviews conducted, the researcher found that public perception of the police's personal protective equipment may not be as negative as was initially found. The researcher concludes that the public could be argued to be more afraid of

a lack of accountability taken by police and government bodies rather than the physical resources used for policing, therefore suggesting that the public fears not being in control of the way in which they are policed. Within a democratic society, it could be argued that the public have become accustomed to being able to have their input into aspects of governance, through elections, and have now began to expect more from the services. The researcher also concludes that the public potentially view the police as more of a service than a force and, as a result of this, expect to receive more from the exchange due to their monetary support through taxation. The researcher found that, for the most part, the Taser is an effective device that enables officers to do their job efficiently whilst acting as a safer alternative to the use of firearms. They also found that the Taser, if not used correctly and in appropriate situations, has the potential to be a dangerous piece of equipment that requires extensive training. The researcher found that a large portion of the conceptual considerations made within the project were heavily dominated by political issues, suggesting to the researcher that the police has become an increasingly politicised organisation, contradicting, to some extent, its claim that it is apolitical. In regard to the overall attitude towards the Taser, the researcher found that the public have a tenacious desire to be and feel protected. With this, the researcher believes that the public will support police decisions as long as they are sufficiently justified and appear to be reflective of the needs of the communities.

The researcher also found that, because of the nature of the topic they decided upon and the prevalent focus on public perception, the most relevant findings came from the primary research conducted. They found the desk based research to mostly consist of the opinions of organisations, academics or the media which did contribute to the findings but, due to the gross range in perspectives, they did not allow the researcher to conclude on many matters. The researcher also believes that the lack of respondents participating in the semi-structured interviews incited limitations for the project as it did not allow for a sufficient variety of opinions. Nevertheless, they found the information acquired from these interviews to be relevant and valid. Although the researcher has stated that they found the semi-structured interviews to be the most influential method of research, gathering information from this source were time consuming, through the preparation of interview material as well as the transcription once they had been conducted. Another issue that the researcher found was that some of their questions were not diverse enough, considering not all respondents were still in the force so questions about their current conduct were not necessary relevant to some. Another matter that the researcher found to limit the project was the fact that the questions were too open-ended which lead to the respondents going off on tangents in some cases. Although this proved to be useful with some questions as it invoked thoughts that the

researcher had not necessarily had before, it mostly took away from the answers the researcher was seeking. One final matter regarding the semi-structured interview was the fact that, on one occasion, the researcher inadvertently missed out one of the questions in the interview, limiting the results gathered from that particular respondent. Although this did not appear to have a significant impact on the project, it caused a discrepancy in the consistency of the interviews.

References

- Amnesty International USA. (2017). *Amnesty International Urges Stricter Limits on Police Taser Use as U.S. Death Toll Reaches 500*. [online] Available at: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/amnesty-international-urges-stricter-limits-on-police-taser-use-as-us-death-toll-reaches-500> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2017].
- App.college.police.uk. (2017). *Conducted energy devices (Taser)*. [online] Available at: <http://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/armed-policing/conducted-energy-devices-taser/> [Accessed 7 Mar. 2017].
- Clarke, C. and Andrews, S. (2017). *The ignitability of petrol vapours and potential for vapour phase explosion by use of TASER® law enforcement electronic control device*. [online] Science and justice journal. Available at: [http://www.scienceandjusticejournal.com/article/S1355-0306\(14\)00051-3/fulltext](http://www.scienceandjusticejournal.com/article/S1355-0306(14)00051-3/fulltext) [Accessed 21 Mar. 2017].
- Feast, C. (2016). *POLICE April*. 1st ed. [PDF] Leatherhead, Surrey: PFEW, p.5. Available at: http://www.polfed.org/documents/Police_April_2016_web_file.pdf [Accessed: 20/01/2017].
- Gilling, D. (2014). *Reforming police governance in England and Wales*. 1st ed.
- Gov.uk. (2014). *Police use of firearms statistics, England and Wales: financial year ending 31 March 2014: data tables - Publications - GOV.UK*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-use-of-firearms-statistics-england-and-wales-financial-year-ending-31-march-2014-data-tables> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2016].
- Hull Daily Mail. (2017). *'I want every police officer to have a Taser' says police and crime commissioner Matthew Grove*. [online] Available at: <http://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/want-police-officer-taser-says-police-crime/story-28979193-detail/story.html> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2017].
- Ipcc.gov.uk. (2017). *Use of force | Independent Police Complaints Commission*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ipcc.gov.uk/page/use-of-force> [Accessed 8 Feb. 2017].
- IPCC review of Taser complaints and incidents. (2014). 1st ed. [PDF] London: IPCC. Available at: https://www.ipcc.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/guidelines_reports/Taser_report_final_2014.pdf [Accessed: 20/01/2017].
- Kentish, B. (2017). *Government approves plans to give police more powerful stun guns*. [online] The Independent. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/police-officers-more-powerful-stun-guns-england-wales-issue-home-secretary-amber-rudd-a7607816.html> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2017].

Lee, M. and McGovern, A. (2013). Force to sell: policing the image and manufacturing public confidence. *Policing and Society*, 23(2), pp.103-124.

Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy*. 1st ed. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

MacDonald, J., Kaminski, R. and Smith, M. (2009). The Effect of Less-Lethal Weapons on Injuries in Police Use-of-Force Events. *American Journal of Public Health*, 99(12), pp.2268-2274.

New Scientist. (2017). *Tasers safer than batons and fists*. [online] Available at: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn18168-tasers-safer-than-batons-and-fists/> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2017].

Newburn, T. (2012). *Handbook of Policing*. 1st ed. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Neyroud, P., Beckley, A., Collier, P. and Clayton, J. (2004). *Policing, ethics and human rights*. 1st ed. [Cullompton, Devon]: Willan Publishing.

Nottingham, T. (2017). *Police firearms officer cut due to fall in gun crime*. [online] Nottingham Post. Available at: <http://www.nottinghampost.com/police-firearms-officer-cut-fall-gun-crime/story-12224416-detail/story.html> [Accessed 25 Apr. 2017].

Paoline, E., Terrill, W. and Ingram, J. (2012). Police Use of Force and Officer Injuries: Comparing Conducted Energy Devices (CEDs) to Hands- and Weapon-Based Tactics. *Police Quarterly*, 15(2), pp.115-136.

Polfed.org. (2016). *More smoke and mirrors from government on firearms officers*. [online] Available at: <http://www.polfed.org/newsroom/3335.aspx> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2016].

Rogers, M. (2003). Police Force! An Examination of The Use of Force, Firearms and Less-Lethal Weapons by British Police. *The Police Journal*, 76(3), pp.189-203.

Senate.gov. (2017). *U.S. Senate: Constitution of the United States*. [online] Available at: [https://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm#amdt_2_\(1791\)](https://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm#amdt_2_(1791)) [Accessed 18 Apr. 2017].

Silverman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research*. 1st ed. London: Sage Publications LTD.

Swanborn, P. (2012). *Case study research*. 1st ed. London: Sage South Asia.

The Justice Gap. (2017). *Watchdog warns police to resist 'mission creep' over Taser use - The Justice Gap*. [online] Available at: <http://thejusticegap.com/2014/07/watchdog-warns-police-resist-mission-creep-taser-use-2/> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2017].

Waddington, P. (1991). *The strong arm of the law*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp.75-104.

Walker, P. (2017). *London's richest neighbourhoods are getting their own private police force*. [online] The Independent. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-richest-neighbourhoods-private-police-force-knightsbridge-mayfair-belgravia-metropolitan-a7615711.html> [Accessed 17 Jan. 2017].

Watts, J. (2017). *London terror attack: Ex-Met policeman raises fears over 'reduction' in armed officers*. [online] The Independent. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/london-terror-attack-reduction-armed-police->

[officers-parliament-gates-stabbing-scene-keith-palmer-a7646421.html](#) [Accessed 29 Apr. 2017].

Wood, J. (2003). Self-Policing and the Policing of the Self: Violence, Protection and the Civilizing Bargain in Britain. *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés*, 7(1), pp.109-128.

Wright, S. (1978). New Police Technologies: An Exploration of the Social Implications and Unforeseen Impacts of Some Recent Developments. *Journal of Peace Research*, 15(4), pp.305-322.